

Digital Photography Software

It's all very well buying a state-of-the-art digital camera, but all that technology won't make you a better photographer. However, your PC can help you take better photos, as Mike Bedford explains

Digital cameras are one of the major technological success stories of recent years and even entry-level cameras now have features that could be found only on a top-end SLR a few years ago (see *Labs*, page 182).

However, even if you buy a top-of-the-range digital SLR, your results will still depend on your skill as a photographer. Luckily, training material isn't in short supply. This month we've looked at a selection

of products aimed at helping digital photographers get the most from their camera.

Your camera probably came with photo-editing software, but this will be a basic entry-level package. To progress, you need more sophisticated software (see our Labs review of image editors in *Shopper*, April 2005). In this review, we demonstrate the breadth of software available by looking at a range of different types of package.

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Information for the digital photographer is also plentiful on the web. We've found a handful of sites that have particularly good tutorials, and we've also taken a look at a few general-interest photographic websites. Finally, we provide a short introduction to online photo-sharing services. So whether you're an experienced digital photographer or you're just about to take the plunge, you'll find something here to help you get more from your digital camera.

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE

PhotographyTips

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.photographytips.com

This site is a collection of tutorials for beginners and experienced photographers. It originally had a 35mm emphasis, but many of the fundamentals apply to any form of photography.

The main sections are divided into sub-categories. Technique, for example, includes 11 topics such as light, composition, night photography and darkroom techniques. There's also an extensive glossary, a forum and a gallery.

Although PhotographyTips was originally free, if you want access to the site in its entirety you now have to pay a monthly subscription of US \$4.95 (around £2.80). However, if you choose not to become a member there's still plenty of interesting and useful information available to all.



PhotographyTips is a nice pay-site for the enthusiastic photographer with plenty of free material too

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE

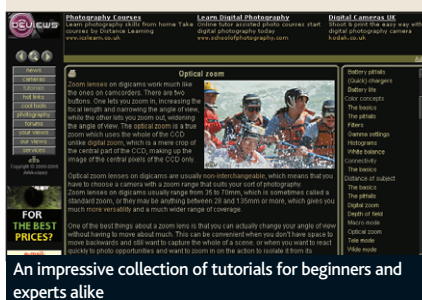
DCViews

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.dcvviews.com

DCViews is one of the web's primary resources for the digital photographer. It includes an extensive collection of product reviews as well as up-to-date news reports on all aspects of digital photography. It also has plenty of information to help you get the most from your camera by teaching you the tricks of the trade.

The tutorial section is vast. If you want to understand the basics of photography such as depth of field, exposure values (EVs) and focal length, or you're making the transition to digital and want to know the difference between different file formats or between optical and digital zoom, or you want to read up on nature photography, you'll find help here. There are also links to lots of third-party tutorials.



An impressive collection of tutorials for beginners and experts alike

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE

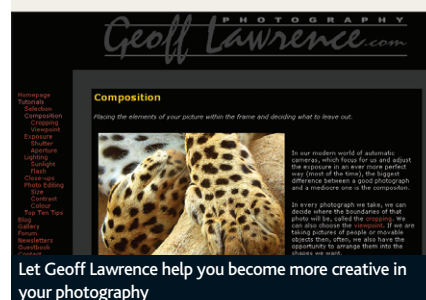
Geoff Lawrence Photography

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.geofflawrence.com

The introduction says that this site is for people "who would like to raise their game above the humble snapshot and create something that is of genuine interest to others". If that's your aim, you won't be disappointed by what's on offer.

Absolute beginners should look elsewhere, but if you've progressed a little and you're keen to take the next step then this site is highly recommended. You'll find a good selection of tutorials covering the technical and artistic sides of photography. The tutorials are well written, entertaining and informative. They are well presented with plenty of photographs. And judging from the many photographs that adorn the site, we'd conclude that Geoff Lawrence knows a thing or two about photography.



Let Geoff Lawrence help you become more creative in your photography

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

VIRTUAL TRAINING COMPANY

Digital Photography

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £94 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Virtual Training Company

01982 560711

DETAILS www.vtc.com



As with all VTC products, Digital Photography is a computer video-based course that plays directly from a CD. The entire course includes 40 separate movies and lasts for five hours.

The course is aimed at beginners, starting with topics such as Why digital? that will be second nature to most *Shopper* readers. However, in the corporate environment, where this product will be mostly sold, there will be a broad mix of abilities, hence the need for this product as well as more advanced material.

After covering the fundamental topics, the course goes on to look at choosing a camera and understanding the specification, and then the basics of such subjects as exposure, shutter speed and aperture. It then covers various types of photography such as portraits, landscapes, action, nature and abstract.

Although the subject matter is reasonably comprehensive, the presentation leaves something to be desired. The word 'movies' is a slight misnomer as they don't include a lot of motion. The overall impression is much more akin to a PowerPoint presentation with a voice commentary. And although some of the points are illustrated with graphics, these are of modest resolution and are limited to just 256 colours.

✓ Good introduction to the basics of digital photography

✗ Doesn't make the most of a PC's multimedia capabilities

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 16MB RAM, runs from CD

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

CATS

Digital Photography for Beginners

RATING ★★

PRICE £29 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Computer Assembly

Training School 01295 264499

DETAILS www.rapidresults.co.uk



This claims to give the absolute beginner a head start in digital photography, and in the sense that it talks about choosing a digital camera it is indeed aimed at the beginner. However, if you're looking for a general introduction to digital photography the choice of topics is severely limited. There's nothing on how to use a camera or the basics of photography; it is almost entirely concerned with image manipulation. The section on choosing a camera says little other than that you should choose the best resolution you can afford.

Like the two products from VTC, this course takes the form of a series of videos. In this case, the videos are all animated screen grabs with verbal commentaries. Although the commentary isn't unduly polished, the author's enthusiasm for his subject is obvious.

Topics covered include red-eye removal, changing the background using the clone tool, altering colours, adjusting the brightness, cropping and optimising photos for email. The principles are illustrated using Photoshop though it tries not to be too specific to one product. These chapters give beginners a feel for what they can do once they start taking digital photos.

✓ Good introduction to photo-manipulation for beginners

✗ No mention of how to use your camera

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, Pentium II processor, 32MB RAM, runs from CD



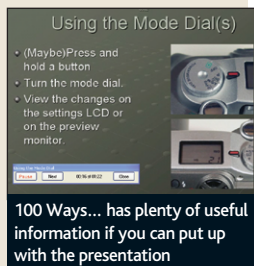
REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

VIRTUAL TRAINING COMPANY

100 Ways to Get the Most from Your Digital Camera

RATING ★★

PRICE £94 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Virtual Training Company
01982 560711DETAILS www.vtc.com

Like Digital Photography from the same publisher (left), this product comprises videos that can be followed one at a time to form a complete course. There are 120 movies lasting six hours, so it would make sense not to attempt to complete the course in a single session.

The course is more practical than Digital Photography and attempts to describe what the various controls on a digital camera do, rather than presenting theoretical topics such as depth of field and exposure. However, this isn't particularly easy to do generically since cameras differ so much from one model to another. The other main area covered is photo manipulation using Adobe Photoshop and Photoshop Elements.

Again, the movies don't come close to making the best use of a PC's multimedia facilities. In fact, the 'movies' in 100 Ways... are even more like PowerPoint presentations. Except for the chapters on Photoshop, most screens are composed entirely of textual bullet points. In the section on using a digital camera, the screen shown is one of the few with any graphics at all. The commentary is similarly lacking in sparkle.

✓ Includes tips on both using the camera and editing the results

✗ Very poor graphics to accompany the commentary

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 16MB RAM, runs from CD

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

ASIMEX
123 of Digital Imaging

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firstcall-photographic.co.ukDETAILS www.123di.com

Like the other three products reviewed on this page, 123 of Digital Imaging claims to provide an easy way to learn about digital photography. But there the similarity ends. Instead of so-called video clips, this package uses a combination of onscreen text, diagrams and photographs. This might sound like a backwards step, but the presentation is superb and the illustrative photographs are of a very high quality.

Information is presented in three sections: digital-imaging basics and camera selection; enhancing images in the 'pixelroom' and sharing, managing, viewing and printing photographs. Each section contains a large selection of topics, which are presented at three levels to suit all abilities. For example, the section on pixels describes the relationship between resolution and detail for the beginner, covers image sensors, interpolation and aliasing at intermediate level, and goes into the mathematics of base transformations at the advanced level. The only disappointment concerns the coverage of photo manipulation. Six packages are covered, but all are members of the Photoshop family.

Although we chose to look at this package for its educational content, it isn't really a course; there's just too much information to work through it all step by step. However, as a reference work this is an excellent choice.

✓ Excellent presentation comprising text, diagrams and superb photos

✗ Over-emphasis on one family of photo-manipulation software

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/NT/2000/Me/XP, 120MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 100MB disk space

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE

Royal Photographic Society

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.rps.org

Founded in 1853, the Royal Photographic Society's aim is to promote the art and science of photography. It does this by providing services to anyone with an interest in the subject, whether amateur or professional.

The site explains how to join the RPS, and there's also news, information on RPS events and a shop selling a small selection of products. The most interesting section for the casual visitor, however, is the portfolios. Maintained by members, each portfolio includes a biography and shows samples of their work, which you can search by the name of the photographer or by subject. Looking at what others have achieved isn't just a matter of idle curiosity; it's also one of the best ways to learn creative skills.



Let one of the foremost photographic societies inspire you

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE

Digital Photography Review

RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.dpreview.com

Although this site contains a handful of tutorials, a gallery and various forums, it aims to keep you up to date on issues relating to digital photography and provide detailed information about various products.

You can search for cameras by manufacturer or release date, or by using the feature search to pick one that meets your requirements, then view the camera's specification, look at a side-by-side comparison or read a product review. Extensive reviews are available for the most popular cameras. Each review is several pages long and is illustrated with plenty of photographs showing details of the camera and its menus, as well as photographs taken by the camera to illustrate the image quality.



Weigh up your options here before buying a new camera

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY WEBSITE

The Luminous Landscape

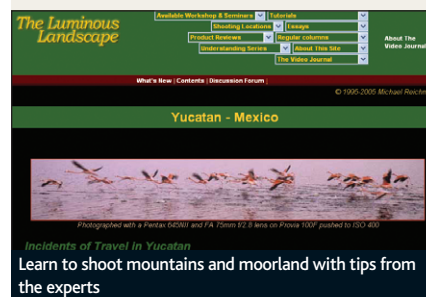
RATING ★★★★★

WEB www.luminous-landscape.com

If you are interested in landscapes, this is the site for you. It contains 2,300 pages of articles, tutorials and product reviews, as well as lots of high-quality, inspirational photographs.

The tutorials include topics such as creating panoramas, working in black and white and astro photography. They cover both camera skills and digital darkroom techniques. Another section contains articles on specific locations for landscape photography, although these are biased towards North America.

The camera reviews are not as extensive as that on sites such as Digital Photography Review. However, the different insights provided by landscape photographers will make interesting reading to those who share this passion.



Learn to shoot mountains and moorland with tips from the experts

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK/CD

50 Fast Digital Camera Techniques

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £12.25 inc VAT

ISBN 076452500X

PAGES 336

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

DETAILS www.wiley.co.uk



Fifty techniques might not sound like a lot for a subject as broad as digital photography, but the word 'technique' undersells this book. Each technique is in effect a mini chapter on subjects as varied as using focal length, composition, buying photographic lights and infrared photography.

The author assumes that readers already have a camera so there's nothing here on choosing what to buy, but otherwise the coverage is extensive. There's information on buying accessories and lots on how to use your camera. The tips range from the technical to the creative and from instructive to inspiring. However, the book is exclusively about taking photographs; editing them is not covered, presumably because of the blanket coverage of this topic elsewhere.

Our one niggle is that almost all the pictures are printed in black and white on matt paper. There's just a 32-page section of colour photographs on glossy paper. This makes the book less attractive, but the companion CD containing all the book's photographs means you can see them in full colour.

This book wipes the floor with most of the software guides to digital photography and, at this price, you really can't go wrong.

✓ A vast amount of information at a low price

✗ Most of the book is presented in black and white

REQUIREMENTS CD: Windows 98/2000/Me/XP, 128MB RAM, 350MB disk space

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK/CD

Rick Sammon's Complete Guide to Digital Photography

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £23 inc VAT

ISBN 0393325512

PAGES 517

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk

DETAILS www.wwnorton.com



Some books on digital photography cover just photo manipulation and some tell you only how to use a camera, but this book covers all aspects. The emphasis is on editing, printing and sharing digital images, but about 200 pages are concerned with taking photographs.

The information ranges from the very basic – choosing a camera or a PC on which to store and edit your photographs – through material such as landscape photography, metering techniques and editing with curves, up to advanced and unusual stuff such as restoring old photographs and 3D effects.

If you were to read this book from cover to cover you'd be occupied for some time. However, you may well choose to dip into it from time to time or simply get inspiration from its superb photos, all of which are reproduced in colour (except for those in the sections on black and white photography).

There's also a companion CD that includes a PowerPoint gallery of the author's photographs with a commentary, QuickTime tutorials on Photoshop 7 and various time-limited software trials, including Photoshop Elements.

✓ Top-notch advice; superbly presented

✗ Slight over-emphasis on photo manipulation

REQUIREMENTS Not specified



REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

ULEAD
Photo Explorer 8.5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £20 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.ulead.co.uk

A useful collection of photo-management tools in one place

Photo Explorer's introductory help page explains that the program works like Windows Explorer but is tailored specifically to multimedia files, so if you're working with photographs, you see thumbnail images rather than filenames. Although this might have been a valid distinction when the first version of Photo Explorer hit the streets, now that Windows Explorer can do this it's pertinent to ask what it offers users of Windows XP. In fact, it does have a few nice additional features.

If you don't already have a photo-manipulation package, Photo Explorer includes basic functions such as converting between file formats, adjusting contrast, resampling and red-eye removal. Many of the actions can be applied to multiple files at once. Another nice facility is automatic file renaming. You select a group of files and supply the criteria for renaming them. Options include re-ordering numbers in filenames, changing one text string to another and including the time and date the shot was taken in the filename.

The slideshow creation feature is also useful. In addition to seeing the show onscreen, which you can do with Windows, you can write it to a Video CD or DVD that is playable in a domestic DVD player.

✓ Manage, edit, rename and print your images or create a slideshow

✗ Much of the functionality duplicates what's built into Windows

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE/2000/Me/XP, Pentium III processor, 64MB RAM (128MB recommended), 45MB disk space

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

COREL
Photo Album 6

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £27 inc VAT

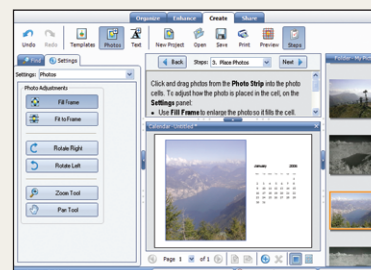
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.corel.co.uk

Photo management brought to a new level of sophistication

Like Photo Explorer, Photo Album aims to be a one-stop shop for a range of photographic needs but it doesn't provide the same degree of sophistication as dedicated image editors.

The first time you run Photo Album it offers to find every photograph (that is, every bitmapped image) on your hard disk. When you start browsing photos you can choose 'all photographs' as an alternative to browsing individual folders. You can also add titles and descriptions to your photographs. The embedded data is accessible to any application that supports metadata.

In addition to photo-management facilities, Photo Album also offers basic editing features, plus some less common ones such as a panorama tool and a 'thinify' feature to make people look slimmer. There are also photo printing and sharing, slideshow and automatic batch renaming features.

The software also has some more unusual features. There's a selection of tools to help you create greetings cards, calendars, CD labels and the like, and there's also a photo backup facility, which is essential in making sure you don't lose all your photographs in the event of a disk failure or other mishap.

✓ Provides some useful features not available in many similar packages

✗ Doesn't cater for Windows 98 and Me users

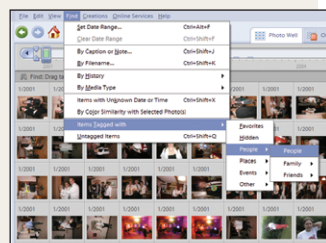
REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 400MHz Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM (256MB recommended), 150MB disk space

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

ADOBE
Photoshop Album 2.0

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £27 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Beginners need look no further for an all-in-one package

Despite the word Photoshop in the title, this isn't primarily a photo-editing package. Instead, like the other three packages on this page, it provides a range of facilities for digital photographers.

Photoshop Album covers three main areas: Find, Fix and Create & Share. The Find section manages your photographs and the facilities are similar to those in Photo Album, although there are some additional features. The concept of tags lets you specify people, places and so on to help you find photographs later. Images can also be grouped together into collections for easy management. Collections are conceptual groupings, so creating one doesn't cause any files to be copied or moved on your disk.

Fixing is concerned with photo editing and, although some manual control is provided, the emphasis is on automatic functions, so this will appeal to non-expert users. For example, you can tell Photoshop Album to fix the lighting or the colour or sharpen your photograph. Sharing includes tools to help you email your photographs, turn them into a slideshow or burn them to disc. Finally, Creating allows you to include your photographs in cards, calendars and so on.

✓ Tags and collections are a major help in organising your photographs

✗ Image manipulation is pretty basic

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/Me/XP, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM (256MB recommended), 250MB disk space

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

TRISCAPE
FxFoto 3.0

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Creative Media Edition

\$40 (around £23); Deluxe

Edition \$30 (around £17);

Standard Edition free

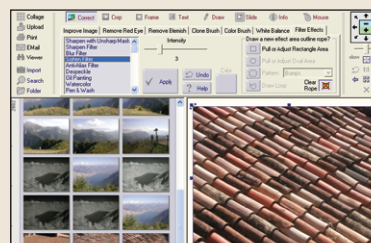
DETAILS www.fxfoto.com

Photo management and a decent image editor in one package

FxFoto claims to be an all-in-one package and covers the same sort of ground as Photo Explorer, Photo Album and Photoshop Album. However, its emphasis is different from the others. The program offers the usual photo-management features, including keywords that can be attached to photographs and searched for later. It also provides facilities for creating slideshows, sending them via email and publishing them on a website. Although it lets you create collages of your photographs, it doesn't include the ability to create cards and calendars.

Many of FxFoto's features aren't as intuitive to use as similar products. However, FxFoto's photo-editing facilities are head and shoulders above the competition. Although they fall short of those in a dedicated photo-editing package, there's far more than is available with the other packages here.

We looked at the Creative Media Edition, but the differences between this and the Deluxe Edition are slight and not worth the extra money. The Standard Edition doesn't support collages or slideshows or have additional editing filters, but even this has remarkably powerful management and editing facilities.

✓ Excellent image-editing facilities for the price

✗ User interface isn't as intuitive as other packages

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/2000/Me/XP, 256MB RAM (512MB recommended), 2MB disk space (Standard), 4MB disk space (Deluxe), 12MB disk space (Creative Media)



REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

ULEAD
COOL 360

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £23 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.softwareparadise.co.ukDETAILS www.ulead.co.uk

Forget super wide-angle lenses – COOL 360 can create 360 degree panoramas from a series of photos

Some digital cameras have a panorama feature and, with a bit of skill and lots of patience, you can turn any series of overlapping photographs into a panorama. Without special tools, though, that panorama will be an ordinary graphics file such as a JPEG or a TIFF. COOL 360 lets you make panoramas irrespective of what camera you have. It even lets you create virtual reality-type panoramas that you can pan around at will.

Just take a series of shots, panning your camera right or left between each one and making sure there's some overlap. Take a super-wide angle series of photographs or the full 360°. Don't worry too much about making sure each shot lines up horizontally as COOL 360 will sort out any slight errors.

Put the pictures on your PC and tell COOL 360 which photographs to include in your panorama and whether it's super-wide angle or 360°. It will create a first pass that you can fine-tune by hand, but in our tests we didn't need to alter it. The software hid the joints well and will even make a passable job of merging neighbouring photographs if they don't have an overlap. Finally, you can export your panorama in various formats, including ordinary graphics files and QuickTime movies.

✓ Makes an excellent job of stitching together a series of photographs

✗ Quite slow in generating movies if you're using high-resolution images

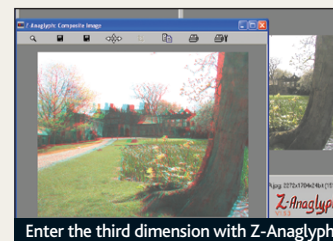
REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/NT4.0 (XP works although not quoted by Ulead), Pentium processor, 32MB RAM, 20MB disk space

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

Z-GRAPHIX
Z-Anaglyph

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DETAILS www.z-graphix.com

Enter the third dimension with Z-Anaglyph

Although professionals use special cameras to shoot scenes in 3D, if you accept certain limitations you can get very acceptable results with an ordinary digital camera. The secret is to take two shots – called a stereo pair – from two slightly different viewpoints. These two images then have to be displayed in such a way that the viewer sees one with only the left eye and the other with the right. Using just the one camera works with stationary subjects but is not suitable if something is likely to move between the two shots.

Although there are many ways of displaying a stereo pair, one of the simplest is to turn them into an anaglyph, which the human brain perceives as three-dimensional when viewed through a pair of red-cyan glasses. The purpose of Z-Anaglyph is to turn a stereo pair into an anaglyph that can then be viewed onscreen or printed out.

Operation of the software couldn't be simpler. Open up the two images, tell Z-Anaglyph whether you want a red-cyan (which works with colour) or red-green (monochrome only) anaglyph, preview the result onscreen and make any fine adjustment to the registration of the two images. When you've finished, save it to file. Z-Anaglyph does its job well and creates some striking results.

✓ Simple approach to making impressive 3D photographs

✗ Single camera approach means you can't shoot moving objects

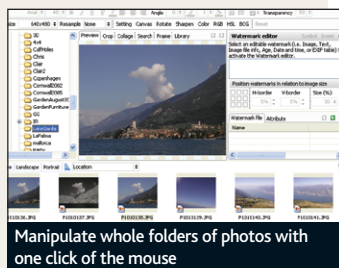
REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/NT4.0/2000/XP, 100MHz Pentium processor, 64MB RAM (32MB for Windows 95 or 98)

REVIEW PHOTOGRAPHY SOFTWARE

UNIDREAM
PowerBatch

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

SUPPLIER http://www.unidreamtech.com/downloads/pb_setup.exeDETAILS www.unidreamtech.com

Manipulate whole folders of photos with one click of the mouse

If you often carry out the same operation on lots of photographs – such as turning them into thumbnails for use on your website – PowerBatch will eliminate the repetitive work. As its name suggests, this program carries out photo manipulation on whole batches of images at once. You select a folder, tell it what you want to do and the operation will be performed on all the photos in that folder.

In addition to resizing your photographs, you can convert them to a different file format, convert them to greyscale or sepia, add a border, rotate them or carry out adjustments to the brightness, contrast or colour. Each operation generates new files, so your originals remain untouched. The full commercial version of PhotoWatermark Professional, of which PowerBatch is a cut-down version, also enables you to add watermarks.

Rather than just rewriting your images to a new folder with the same filenames, you can rename your files. This can be especially useful since digital cameras assign unmemorable names. You can rename your files with the location and a serial number, the time and date it was taken, the original filename plus some additional information or whatever else you choose.

✓ Useful array of batch facilities

✗ Watermarking feature not available in the free version

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/NT/2000/XP, 933MHz Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 2MB disk space (also requires space for image processing)

ONLINE PHOTO-SHARING SERVICES

One of the great things about digital photographs is that you can send them to people within minutes of taking them. But should you send every photograph of your recent holiday or family wedding to everyone, or should you try to second-guess which shots each person would like to see? If they have a dial-up connection, every photograph they don't want to see could tie up their phone line unnecessarily for a couple of minutes. A far better way is to put thumbnails online so that they can choose which photographs they want to download. If you're competent in web design you could do this yourself, but it's easier to use an online photo-sharing service.

Once you've set up an account with one of these services – many of them are free – you can create albums and upload photographs into them. You can then specify who you want to share your photographs with and they'll receive an email telling them that you've put the album online and giving them a URL. When they go to the site, they can see all your photographs as thumbnails and decide which ones they'd like to download or see at full size. Many also offer a print service so your friends can order photographic prints that they'll receive in the post.

There are a number of photo-sharing services available in the UK that are also well worth checking out. Try visiting one of the following websites: www.photodeal.co.uk, www.photobox.co.uk, www.pixum.co.uk and <http://photos.fotango.com>. **CS**

